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A “religious revolution”? Print media, sexuality and religious discourse in Uganda.

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Abstract

Recently, Uganda has hit international headlines for the controversial Anti-homosexuality Bill (AHB) and for a set of tight measures that have limited the freedom of sexual minorities. This article argues that Uganda’s growth of Pentecostal-charismatic churches (PCCs) is playing a major role in influencing and defining the Ugandan public sphere, including (but not limited to) the ways in which sex and sexuality are conceptualized by, and within, Uganda’s print media. The article suggests that the socially conservative nature of PCCs is highly influential in shaping the way print media write about sex and sexuality. This is because Pentecostal-charismatic constituencies constitute a considerable numerical market that print media cannot ignore. Secondly, Pentecostal-charismatics actively work towards influencing and shaping public policies, politics and public spaces, like newspapers, that discuss and address public morality and decency in the country. As the article will show, within a highly ‘Pentecostalized’ public sphere, alternative public discourses on sexuality are not allowed.

Keywords: Christianity; Pentecostalism; Print Media; Uganda; Sexuality.

1. Introduction

The internationally ‘famed’ Anti-homosexuality Bill (AHB), along with other legislation and public debates that determined the politicization of sexuality in Uganda, represent a valuable lens through which to read and understand rapid social and political shifts in the country. Introduced and supported by MP David Bahati during parliamentary discussions in 2009, the AHB has more recently been associated with the promotion of the Parliamentary speaker Rebecca Kadaga. Both Kadaga and

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Bahati represent a new generation of politicians with strong public connections to Pentecostal-charismatic churches (PCCs).

In October 2012, the speaker of the Ugandan Parliament, Rebecca Kadaga arrived at Uganda's Entebbe airport to be greeted as a heroine by cheering crowds, who were mainly from PCCs. Kadaga was returning from a visit to Quebec, where in the aftermath of accusations of human rights violations at the expense of sexual minorities, she had accused the Canadian foreign minister, John Baird, of "arrogance ... [and] attacking Uganda and promoting homosexuality".¹ She reminded Mr Baird that Uganda was no longer a colony or protectorate. In front of the cheering crowd she promised that the AHB would be passed by the end of the year as a "Christmas gift for Ugandans".² As it turned out the Bill was not passed that year but it was approved by the Parliament the following year on 20th December 2013 and signed into law by President Museveni in February 2014. Subsequently in August 2014 the Anti-homosexuality Act (AHA) has been nullified by the Constitutional Court that declared the act unconstitutional because it was approved in a rush and with a lack of a quorum. At the time of writing a group of Ugandan MPs led by David Bahati was trying to reintroduce the Bill in Parliament.

Many members of the Ugandan public and the international community have argued that the AHB has been used as a political tool to obfuscate the broader corruption of president Museveni's administration and the ruling National Resistance Army (NRM) in an attempt to maintain power. For example, Sylvia Tamale highlights that historically in Uganda when people in power felt vulnerable they turned against weak groups in society; for example colonial authorities used Muslims to explain impediments to progress, Idi Amin blamed the Asian community for economic stagnation, Obote's used of Rwandese refugees when his own political power was under attack and more recently Museveni utilized Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).³ Indeed in many respects the AHB has worked to divert from an array of corruption scandals, along with a slew of restrictive legislative initiatives and the overall retracting democratic climate that has defined the Museveni administration since the late 1990s. Critics of the Bill call it a "unifying force" in a climate of divisiveness.⁴ However, the politicization of sexuality in Uganda must be understood in light of co-existing discourses amongst which Museveni's political

pragmatism provides one possible explanation amongst others. It is possible, for example, to interpret the hardening of homophobic legislations as a measure not of failure but of success, a reaction to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) communities and civil society movements asserting their political identity and rights as never before in Uganda and in other African contexts.

One of the dynamics that warrants deeper investigation in order to understand the political mobilization around sexuality is undoubtedly the rise in numbers and in influence of PCCs. According to Epstein⁵ and Gusman⁶ in recent years nearly one-third of Ugandans have converted to Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity and their growth is also reflected in the influence they are having in the Ugandan public sphere. PCCs have emerged from a very small minority of religious communities that began to take root in the late 1950s and 1960s, and over the past 20 years have started to become very vocal social and political actors - especially in relation to the promotion of conservative and normative understandings of morality and public decency. Partly as a result of this, in Uganda sexual behaviours and their public representation are increasingly predicated upon individual behavioural choice in line with Christian conservative views of moral orders, family and the body. This is both reflected in their preaching and teaching in churches but also through public statements and their active presence and action in more secular spheres. Pentecostalism is a complex movement that cannot simply be understood through monolithic theological interpretations and unified practical actions; in Uganda, though, this movement seems to present a relatively unified message around the moral discourse on sexuality. In particular, the otherwise fragmented Ugandan Pentecostal-charismatic community has found a deep rooted and univocal voice in articulating the immorality of homosexuality. As a Pentecostal-charismatic leader stated during an interview: “The government, they understand not philosophy or theology but numbers: the greater you are the greater the voice and the more like they are to listen. Like with the Marriage and Divorce Bill⁷ and the voting for this, we are pushing against certain aspects of this heavily. Also the issues of homosexuality and lesbianism. We find ourselves needing to unite to fight against this. When talking about the Anti-Homosexuality Bill and the Marriage and Divorce Bill we have to unite”.⁸

This paper argues that in contemporary Uganda it is necessary to understand the influential growth of PCCs to comprehend changes and dynamics within the public sphere. While this is true in several spheres, the article offers an analysis of print media in order to flesh out how public discussions on sex and sexuality in Uganda's media are increasingly aligned to Pentecostal-charismatic sensibilities. Based on an analysis of the four major national newspapers, the article investigates how Pentecostal-charismatic influence operates in two dimensions in terms of print media; firstly Pentecostal constituencies constitute a considerable numerical market that print media cannot ignore, and this is particularly true in the urban areas that absorb the majority of newspapers demand and where PCCs are more numerous. Secondly, it is becoming evident that the way sex and sexuality are discussed by print media is framed into Pentecostal-charismatic understandings and that alternative discourses are not allowed. This reflects the increasing public importance that Pentecostal-charismatic actors are exerting in the public and in the political sphere.⁹ As Thomas suggested,¹⁰ conservative Pentecostals have a clear mission and they actively aim to change societies through a religious inspired struggle. In this process mass media play an important role in the formation of a new political and religious identity.¹¹ Meyer and Moore stated the media create and reinforce "certain modes of religious intervention in society"¹² and in this sense Ugandan media are certainly going through a process of modification that deserves careful scrutiny.

The article draws upon extensive ethnographic research that was conducted in Kampala over eight months, from November 2012 to June 2013, amongst four large PCCs.¹³ During this time the output from Uganda's four main print media outlets was digested and analyzed and interviews were conducted with journalists from each respective newspaper. These newspapers are: *The New Vision*, the majority state owned daily; *The Daily Monitor*, *The Vision*'s daily competitor owned by the Kenyan-based Nation Media Group; *The Observer*, an independent thrice-weekly publication; and *The Red Pepper*, Uganda's first tabloid newspaper, also a daily publication. In addition to this print media focus, a survey was conducted of the nation's radio stations, in order to gain a greater appreciation of the scope and breadth of broadcast coverage. The study highlights the fact that despite the somewhat limited distribution of Uganda's print media, in comparison to television and radio, its impact

on the Ugandan public sphere is much greater than circulation statistics would suggest.¹⁴ In fact there is a close link between print media and radio, in particular. *The Monitor* has two 'sister' radio stations, KFM and Dembe FM. *The Vision's* operating group runs five radio stations and two television enterprises. Articles and news stories from across print media are used as the basis for radio and TV discussion. Furthermore, although newspaper sales are nowhere near as high as the listener/viewership of radio and TV, newspapers are frequently shared and circulated for several days among many people; the number of readers vastly outnumbers the actual sales figures of newspapers. For example *The Monitor* estimates that they sell 30,000 copies per day, but that their readership is ten times greater.¹⁵ Many journalists stated that readership is also much greater than copy sales indicate, because of their online readership numbers, too. This is indicative of the continued rapid evolution of the media landscape in Uganda.

2. The Descent of Pentecostalism and Sexuality in the Ugandan Public Sphere

The link between organized religion and public action in Uganda can be traced back to colonial and post-colonial history when religious actors played an inextricable role in the national public sphere.¹⁶ *De facto* religious sectarianism has defined Ugandan politics since Christianity first took hold in the Bugandan monarchy where Catholics and Protestants played out games of imperial influence. During the decade before independence political parties began to form based largely along Catholic and Anglican divides¹⁷ finding representation in their respective political parties; Obote's Ugandan People's Congress (UPC) was linked to the Anglican Church of Uganda, while the Democratic Party (DP) was linked to the Catholic Church.¹⁸ Idi Amin, the only Muslim to serve as President between 1971 and 1979, intensified the powers of the Catholic and Anglican traditions while he banned and persecuted the small evangelical and Pentecostal churches which had proliferated in the 1960s.¹⁹

When Museveni came to power in 1986 the country was in ruins, and his administration attempted to rebuild non-functioning institutions by adopting the structural adjustment programmes of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank.²⁰ The National Resistance Movement (NRM) assured the Ugandan public that it was a movement of fundamental change and the main promise was to put an end to religious and ethnic divisiveness by creating a broad-based representative

government.²¹ In his inaugural address Museveni stated: “No one should think that what is happening today is a mere change of guard: it is a fundamental change, as such, is nothing short of mere turmoil. We have had one group getting rid of another one, only for it to turn out to be worse than the group it displaced. Please do not count us in that group of people.”²²

Gifford²³ positions the rise of early Pentecostal-charismatic churches in parallel to the Museveni’s regime and the early NRM rhetoric of a ‘new dispensation’. In fact, similarly to Museveni’s national project, PC discourses engage with themes of nationalism, neoliberal understandings of economic, material accumulation, social transformation, and democratic governance, while calling for Uganda to be a model for continental change. According to Freston “The Catholic and Anglican churches are of the old dispensation, whereas the ‘born again’ movement is part of the reconstruction”.²⁴

Yet, aside from ideological factors the material realities of the HIV epidemic proved to be an overwhelming force in integrating PC churches into the realm of politics and public action. In fact, in Uganda the HIV epidemic is key to understanding the proliferation, institutionalization and increased politicization of the PC community. Two contributing factors helped to institutionalize PC actors around HIV; their theological stance and the flow of international funding. Firstly “the epidemic itself encouraged a significant theological refocus among Pentecostal churches...from an ‘otherworldly’ to a ‘this-worldly’ attitude, from the urgency of saving as many souls as possible in the short term, to long-term programs, with a stress on the future of the country”.²⁵ Secondly, beginning around 2000, international flows of development aid and local conditions came together and fused political initiatives with the religious agenda of the PC community.

According to Cooper²⁶ and Patterson²⁷ U.S. evangelicals and African PCCs have been among the primary beneficiaries of PEPFAR²⁸ funds. In 2004 PEPFAR, funds originating from the United States government, redirected American strategies around HIV to ‘morally’ informed campaigns. In four years PEPFAR allocated around \$650 million USD to Uganda.²⁹ PCCs capitalized on PEPFAR funds that were channeled through Faith-based Organisations (FBOs) focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention giving

priority to those ones that promoted abstinence and faithfulness”.³⁰ In a certain way PEPFAR has institutionalized the foreign and domestic evangelical presence in “US humanitarian aid by enshrining the moral prohibitions of conservative Christianity in the very conditions of its funding”.³¹ PEPFAR funds prioritised particular moral strategies of prevention over other methods like condoms and funds were distributed along with specific requirements. Stipulations mandated that “one-third of all prevention funds should be spent on the promotion of sexual abstinence before marriage...based on the principles of ABC (Abstain, be Faithful, use Condoms), with condom distribution being treated as an absolute last resort”.³² This produced a repositioning of government and political discourse on condoms in stark contrast with the strategies of the 1980s. The second stipulation in the distribution of PEPFAR funds “exempted faith-based organizations from participating in prevention strategies they found to be morally objectionable”, essentially erasing alternative prevention strategies from the public sphere.³³ Predictably the moral strictures inscribed in PEPFAR legislation have favoured PCCs’ conservative sexual politics.

PEPFAR was not the only humanitarian initiative that has helped to institutionalize the Pentecostal presence. Under the Bush administration an executive order established an official office for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in the US Agency for International Development (USAID), “with the express purpose of facilitating foreign aid contracts with faith-based service providers”.³⁴ USAID issued a subsequent ruling that prohibited discriminatory practices against religious organisations. For Clarke, this equalized the treatment of secular and religious organizations but in reality it advantaged the latter.³⁵

Yet the increasing NGOization’ of churches is not solely the result of U.S. interventionism. After the Kanungu massacre of March 2000, where over 500 members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God died in a collective suicide, public opinion put pressure on the Ugandan government to regulate the relatively new PCCs gaining momentum throughout the country. In response the government began requiring all non-Catholic, non-Anglican and non-Orthodox churches (publically called ‘traditional churches’ in Uganda) to register with the national board of NGOs in the Department of Interior Affairs³⁶ giving start to a proper bureaucratization of Pentecostal-charismatic churches.

When PCCs became increasingly involved in HIV initiatives, they also started to wield significant political influence in Uganda. Pentecostal national strategies started to take on a moral character for prevention driven by the need to raise a new generation of ‘saved’ (‘born again’ in Pentecostal terms) people, future leaders for the country³⁷ and promote their own moral conservative battle that spearheaded the anti-gay movement.

Sexuality has remained a taboo topic in the Ugandan public sphere until the emergence of HIV³⁸ opened a dialogue and made sex and consequently sexuality an acceptable topic for public discussion, and depictions of sexuality increasingly became explicit and plain-spoken.³⁹ This development started to be widely reflected in in print publications, talk-shows, radio programmes and popular culture. For example, in the 90s a new genre of Ugandan magazines that explicitly talked of sex, HIV and lifestyle gained extreme popularity. These were publications in English with captivating names like *Spice*, *Chic*, *Bella*, *Trends* and *Secrets* and they all gave voice to characters that wanted to find a sex partner and that explicitly talked of their sexual experiences that were discussed in terms of pleasure.⁴⁰ By 2000 the publication of those magazines was interrupted and they were no longer available to the public as it will be explained later in the article.

Another testimony that highlights the shift from private to public is represented by the ‘commercialization’ of the Ssenga. Ssenga is an institution that has endured through centuries as a tradition of sexual initiation. Usually the Ssenga was a paternal aunt or a close female relative whose role was to mentor and prepare young women for their future sexual life and to teach them a set of techniques and knowledge around eroticism, reproduction and pre-marriage preparation. For centuries this took place in the private sphere, but in the past 20 years we can see the commercialization of this figure in a very public way. Numerous Ssenga radio programmes and various Ssenga newspaper columns transformed the traditional and domestic role of Ssenga into a new public and liberalized figure. As Tamale explained “a historical institution that served a specific role of initiating young girls for marriage and domesticity suddenly held great potential as a moneymaking venture. Thus, Ssenga presented an informal source of career opportunity, providing a material base of an ongoing sociocultural

institution”.⁴¹ This public shift represents a creative way of income-generation for women in urban settings and a way to overcome the limitations of health service delivery in the post-structural adjustment era in a climate in which open talk of sex had become acceptable. However, in the past few years those columns have become less popular and less frequent in print media.

In more recent times the openness and explicitness that distinguished the way sexuality was publically discussed in the 90s has been replaced by conservative and normative ways of addressing sex and sexuality in public spaces with the establishment of clear dichotomies that define decency and acceptance. This reflects the way conservative religious voices have exerted control over the way sex and sexuality are discussed in the public. It is in the light of these developments that the recent Anti-pornography Bill (also known as the ‘miniskirt ban’), which was passed by the Parliament in December 2013 and signed into law by President Museveni in February 2014, must be interpreted. This law broadly defines pornography as any representation of the sexual parts of a person for ‘primarily sexual excitement’. Simon Lokodo, Uganda's Ethics and Integrity minister has vowed that women wearing clothing that stopped above the knee would be arrested in a revival of the 70s Idi Amin’s law when control over female bodies was a hallmark of the regime. The law, strongly supported by Pentecostal-charismatic circles, created a national anti-pornography committee responsible for its implementation by ensuring “early detection, collection and destroying of pornographic materials defined as any representation through publication, exhibition, cinematography, indecent show, information technology or by whatever means, of a person engaged in real or stimulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a person for primary sexual excitement”.⁴²

While discussions about sex and sexuality are not excluded from the Ugandan public, those are however strongly increasingly aligned and mediated by PCCs’ sensibilities. These churches take great pride in selling themselves as purveyors of the ultimate modern religious experience⁴³ and part of this is their often open approach to discussing sex.⁴⁴ Indeed, Watoto Church, one of the fastest growing Pentecostal churches in Kampala, in 2013 frequently ran sermons that consisted of the pastor and his wife describing their joy-filled sex life as if on a television chat show.⁴⁵ Sex, in

this context, is exalted, but is absolutely confined to a heterosexual and normative married union aimed at reproduction. In this move, PCCs achieve three things: i) a direct and frank engagement with sex, distinguishing themselves from the established churches; ii) adherence to cultural norms that stress the importance of reproduction and moral behaviour; and iii) the maintenance of a patriarchal society. This makes the PCC message about sex very powerful and politically appealing. When sex and sexuality are discussed within the moral framework of normative heterosexual Christian families, they do not contravene codes of moral behaviour or present a serious challenge to the dominant realm of patriarchal power. For Ugandan print media, this is hugely important – it allows the quality newspapers to discuss sex in a non-threatening and ‘morally acceptable’ way. This goes some way towards explaining why there has been very limited public discussion about homosexuality in the Ugandan media in the past few years, despite the coverage afforded to the Anti-Homosexuality Bill in the international press.

3. “We are trying to grow our numbers”: print media and the PC readership

The influence that PCCs exert on print media is most evident at *The Red Pepper*, the tabloid paper renowned for its sensationalist and exaggerated news coverage, liberally sprinkled with sexual innuendo.⁴⁶ It habitually refers to a vagina as ‘Kandahar’, a penis as a ‘whopper’, and breasts as the ‘twin towers’. More derogatively, homosexuality is described as ‘bum drilling’ or ‘bum investing’ and anal sex is a process that ‘shatters’ and ‘terrorizes’ the anus. The newspaper, described in Ben Opolot’s article as an “extension of the freedom of expression”⁴⁷ in Uganda, at the moment of the research was undergoing a radical review away from such sexually explicit content, specifically in order to broaden its readership base. While the Anti-pornography Act made the issue of ‘regenerating’ and ‘softening’ the paper’s content even more urgent, it is relevant to underline that *The Pepper* underwent a makeover in order to achieve this in May 2013, that is much earlier than the passing of the Anti-pornography Bill and signing into law by the President in February 2014.

One of the newspaper’s employees responsible for marketing said that the editors and directors felt that they needed to rebrand because: “We felt that we really needed to start talking about religion. Especially about born-again [Pentecostal-charismatics]. Because their numbers are growing and it is important to appeal to them. So in the

future, I envision that we will have some collaboration with Pentecostal pastors. I am envisioning that they will read *The Red Pepper*. Why are we doing this? We are trying to grow our numbers.”⁴⁸ He also explained: “We [*The Red Pepper*] did some work with Pastor Kiwedde [controversial Pentecostal pastor from Holy Fire Church in Kampala] when he used us to advertise his Sunday programs. It looked a bit weird at the time, but it gave me an idea of what these people are. They are a business. And they will pay to advertise. So if you’re looking for numbers, and to increase your readership, then this is good. The Pentecostal growth is sufficiently strong that we have to make a concerted effort to appeal to them. Our previous approach meant that we closed down this whole group. So we need to change. We did some small research into our readership and people told us that they loved the newspaper, that it is good, but that they can’t take it home or leave it in the office. So we made the decision that we had to rebrand to make people feel comfortable”.⁴⁹

The newspaper’s change of stance came at a time when its main contributor of stories of sexual exploits, Hyena, retired. “A Hyena’s Whopper” was a regular weekly column in *The Red Pepper* and formed a key part of the identity of the newspaper from its inception.⁵⁰ The Hyena column took the form of a monologue and was always accompanied by a graphic cartoon that illustrated that week’s sexual adventures. Hyena’s exploits demonstrated his sexual prowess and masculinity, and described sexual adventures that are free from any moral judgment. He frequently wrote that he ‘shafts’ women, often ‘nabbing’ or ‘hooking’ them from their husbands; the language and descriptions are misogynistic and one article even states that the woman he was having intercourse with shouted out “Wowe, Hyena is raping me!”⁵¹ The rebranding of the paper signalled a radical departure from this and occurred just before the government shut down the newspaper.⁵² Whether the rebranding and the closure were at all linked is unclear. *The Red Pepper* contributors that were interviewed for this research were unwilling to comment on this matter. What is clear, however, is that whilst its sexually engaged content brought it to the attention of the Ugandan public, it has not been sufficient for the newspaper to continue to grow and sustain itself. *The Pepper* felt it had to shift away from its tabloid persona to “be more formal, mature and serious in terms of language and layout”, is “committed to serving our nation”, and wants to widen “the scope of our coverage to appeal to audience clusters that we have hitherto not seriously targeted.”⁵³

From the interviews it also emerged that pragmatically rebranding was also necessary to attract more advertisers.⁵⁴ Representatives from the other main newspapers also reiterated that advertising revenue was vital to support the continuation of print media. Interviewees felt that, in order to protect this revenue stream, newspapers must be consistently socially responsible, rather than attract consistent controversy, like *The Red Pepper*. This was one way that newspapers could build trust between themselves and their readership, and by extension, their (potential) advertisers.

All the participants stated that the inclusion of commentary from religious leaders is one way that newspapers can gain credibility and trust, and thus readership. Another is to provide coverage of faith-based events. PCCs are renowned for their ability to be media savvy and attract young audiences. For example two of the largest churches in Kampala, Watoto Church and Miracle Centre, frequently stage large-scale events to attract young members as well as to garner coverage in the media. Dance, drama, music and fashion events are covered in the press.⁵⁵ These occasions, which are very much youth oriented, are covered in the major newspapers not necessarily for promotional purposes, although that is certainly an intention.⁵⁶ Rather, they showcase idealized young Ugandans – having fun, enjoying music, dance and fashion, and remaining faithful not only to their faith but also to the values of the nation. The ability to appeal to a young audience is important to the print media in Uganda, as the country's population is so young.⁵⁷ One journalist from *The New Vision*, remarked that his newspaper “actually read by the young ones, so I would talk about sex, but I am only careful to the way I phrase my language.”⁵⁸ This attitude is evidenced in newspaper articles where there is significant overlap between what is known as good Christian and good Ugandan.

4. Pentecostal-charismatic values and editorial strategies

The lack of nuanced debates on sexuality in Uganda's print media can also be attributed to the importance that newspapers give to religious institutions. Three of the four newspapers reviewed for this research have weekly sections dedicated to faith, with *The Red Pepper* the only exception. Affiliations to Christian institutions are particularly important because it is the majority religion in Uganda and because of the

historical links that Christianity has with the Ugandan political parties.⁵⁹ Such links were seen as important to the interviewees in order to stimulate readership numbers, bring advertising revenue and promote trust in the newspapers.

During the course of the interviews with Ugandan print journalists and editors, it became clear that each one of the interviewees felt their work was affected by conservative Christian conceptions of family and sexuality. The fact that religion shapes and influences print media on issues related to morality and sexuality is not new. For example, the Catholic paper *Munno*, in print since colonial times and closed in the mid-1990s, was influential in condemning various “immoral publications”, including the magazines mentioned above as *Spice*, *Secrets and Chic*, that appeared in the 90s and often included pictures of semi-nude women. The influence on the press of the Catholic Church brought to reduce the number of publications of the magazine and to change the content of their publications into lighter and less “immoral” topics and images.⁶⁰ In more recent times, though, this role seems to be exercised by PCCs rather than missionary churches. Journalists who interacted with this research project, were cognisant of the dominant public role that PC churches played in the country and expressed their reflections that this influenced Uganda’s print media and its ability, and willingness, to engage with open discussions about sex and sexuality.

This was most evident at *The Vision*. Interviews with journalists from *The Vision*, past and present, and journalists external to *The Vision*, agreed that *The Vision* is the most socially conservative of all the newspapers in Uganda. This is the result of its alignment to the National Resistance Movement (NRM), and its close association with the Pentecostal movement in Uganda. An editor stated: “If you're born again, you probably read the Vision, or that is the newspaper you want to work for.”⁶¹ The reason being, according to the participants, is that the newspaper is heavily influenced by the socially conservative views of its editor-in-chief, Barbara Kaija. Kaija is well known for her religious ethos: she has attended the Haggai Institute, a Christian leadership training program; she is known to be close to the First Lady and family; and is herself Pentecostal.⁶² In her profile for the Haggai Institute, Kaija is quoted as saying that her “job is not just a profession, but a calling” and that she “need[s] to use every opportunity possible to influence others for Jesus”.⁶³ As such, her position as editor-in-chief at *The Vision* means that the media house can:

“[I]nfluence the political agenda either positively or negatively. Our coverage must therefore contribute to sowing seeds of peace, healing, and development over the land. This is important for a country like Uganda, which has a sad history of political violence.”⁶⁴

According to an editor, *The Vision*’s journalists “dance to the tune of the organisation ... they don’t have the backbone to write openly.”⁶⁵ *The Vision* journalists are, she feels, constricted by the newspaper’s editorial strategy and, therefore, are unable to contradict Kaija’s influential beliefs.⁶⁶ A journalist from the *The Observer* and one from *The Red Peppers* stated that Kaija is “a known born again and the religion is seen as overriding the general viewpoints of the newspaper”.⁶⁷ A journalist with *The Vision* stated that the newspaper, in part due to its editorial and journalists’ adherence to Pentecostal-charismatic churches, will not “touch the gay issue.”⁶⁸ Another journalist at *The Vision* confirmed that his (Pentecostal) religious background has a significant effect on his professional life and influence his work on a day-to-day basis.⁶⁹ He feels that he has a calling to be a “media mouthpiece” for the Lord, and that: “In the fight against homosexuality, we [the newspaper and the church] work together on these unifying causes that are aimed at preserving the moral fibre and the values of this country.”⁷⁰

The journalist sees it as his duty to write about what he sees as morally responsible behaviour and to work for a newspaper that shares his personal views. He was adamant that he would be unwilling to write about “vices like homosexuality” because it is “evil” and he would not want to “promote” it.⁷¹ Other *Vision* journalists also stated that they would not want to, or be able to, write about sex outside of marriage or about same sex relationships. Indeed, some of the journalists interviewed commented that *The Vision* actively seeks to recruit new staff on the basis of their Pentecostal understandings because, like Kaija herself, Pentecostal journalists are commonly assumed to be more socially and politically responsible. On the Haggai Institute’s website Kaija herself remarks, “We need media workers who are aware that their profession is a calling and who can use their day-to-day secular work to evangelize.”⁷²

This approach was not only relegated to *The Vision* and all the journalists who were interviewed for this research explained how their religious beliefs had a direct impact

on their journalism.⁷³ Several others explained their struggles with reconciling their job with their faith and described how their beliefs sometimes imposed on their ability to report and comment freely about sensitive topics. Four journalists explained that they were skeptical about a number of recent, high-level public office appointments, which they suggested were made on the basis of their PC faith and not on their ability or experience. They noted that there has been a conflation between ability, honesty and faith; for their strong ethics and moral codes Pentecostal believers have started to be seen as particularly able and trustworthy, more so than people of other faiths, and thus have been elected by the State House into positions of power. One interviewee said: “Yet if I criticize this, then I will be forever put in the emptiness.”⁷⁴ This journalist went on to say that, as well as feeling unable to question these appointments in the public domain as a journalist, they also felt that at church and within their fellowship their allegiance to Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity would be called into question, because they would be seen as doubting fellow Pentecostal Christians because, “If you are a critic and you are a Christian, [then] you are seen as not Christian enough!”⁷⁵

This tension between journalistic objectivity, personal beliefs and social norms lie at the heart of all of the interviews conducted. Interviewees were often at pains to describe Uganda’s free press, their ability to write freely and the abundance of different media outlets. Yet, when questioned about sex and sexuality, in particular, none of the interviewed journalists felt able, or willing, to write about views that are seen as contrary to what was perceived as morally acceptable by the public. Whilst this can in no way be entirely contributed to the influence of PCCs, it does tally with the Christian affiliations of the population. The journalists’ reluctance to discuss sex outside of marriage and homosexuality could, then, be read not simply as a lack of media freedom, but rather as maintaining journalistic objectivity according to the norms and out of respect for the readership’s values.

5. “It’s an unsaid editorial policy... don’t make sex irresponsible”

Journalists from *The Vision*, *The Observer* and *The Monitor* stated that they were editorially encouraged not to be controversial about sex, family life and relationships, and that they were self-policed to ensure what they wrote and what they edited

conformed to an unwritten set of rules that define what is morally acceptable according to their readership.

A columnist in *The Observer* mentioned that she felt that a heavy burden has been placed upon her to discuss sex in such a way that does not contravene both her personal beliefs and her professional position. She states that her writings will only address sex within the institution of marriage and she will not write about sex outside of marriage. She said that to write about sex without the bounds of marriage would be editorially irresponsible of the newspaper and would ultimately lead to the promotion of sexual conduct that leads Uganda's youth "down the wrong path".⁷⁶ She is passionate about her column because she feels it is an important educational tool to combat ignorance about sex. To her detractors she says that she herself "found out about sex through risk taking ... [and] that this was why it was so common that our young girls get defiled, raped and get pregnant."⁷⁷ In this way, her column about sex serves as a public educational tool that engages with sex within the accepted sociocultural boundaries.

An editor of *The Observer* in an interview stated that the decision to write about sex and sexuality ultimately lies with the editors-in-chief of each of Uganda's newspapers.⁷⁸ He believes that Ugandans are "beginning to define their own spirituality and sexuality", but for the newspaper to write about things that are against the accepted norms of sexuality presents difficulties, as this it is "very emotive; people get very unreasonable".⁷⁹ He went on to describe situations where some of his reporters had been threatened by prominent city pastors for writing about homosexuality and he had personally been the victim of slander for allowing the newspaper to print articles about 'deviant' sexual behaviour. The implication was that neither he, nor his reporters, felt confident enough to be able to write about sex that did not conform to accepted norms.

Other journalists who were interviewed corroborated these views. There was a strongly held belief that Uganda was, and remains, a conservative society that holds family values dear. As a result, journalists from *The Monitor* and *The Vision* also commented that their respective newspapers would not cover issues that would not be discussed by the 'typical Ugandan family'. An interviewee from the *New Vision*, stated that "we believe in being socially responsible", that *The Vision* is "a family

paper... driven by what the society is like.”⁸⁰ Therefore she encourages journalists to think about whether their mothers, daughters and granddaughters could read the same pages altogether.⁸¹

The result of such editorial decisions is that when *The Vision* attempts comment or debate pieces about marriage and/or sex, its bottom line is often one that is commensurate with Christian views. For example in January 2013, the newspaper published eleven articles that addressed, directly or indirectly, family and sex.⁸² All of them iterated in some way the importance of Christian views and three of these articles featured the First Lady, Janet Museveni, a prominent Pentecostal voice in the country, and aired her comments. In an article about the Uganda Youth Forum, Janet Museveni is quoted as saying that the organization will “help to support and guide the young couples and strengthen their marriages so that divorce, pornography and alcoholism do not break [marriages]”.⁸³ Similar warnings were given in an article published on the following day.⁸⁴ The article features quotes from Stephen Langa, the director of the Family Life Network, an Ugandan Pentecostal-charismatic advocacy group. Langa urged that parents should counsel their daughters “to abstain from early sex and steer clear of risky behaviour”, and goes on to warn that allowing brothers and sisters to sleep in the same bedroom encourages incest.⁸⁵

Such florid warnings about the dangers of unmarried sexual relations are not uncommon throughout the three main non-tabloid newspapers. Sex is couched in a moralistic discourse that seeks to encourage ‘good’ individual and societal behaviour that ties in with traditional and religious principles.⁸⁶ When sex is written about in a non-medicalised context, there is a tendency for journalists to quote particularly morally upstanding individuals to add gravitas to articles about sex, as shown in the above examples.

Journalists that were interviewed for this research agreed that there is a consistent group of people who are called upon by different media outlets for viewpoints and observations about family life, relationships, and sex; frequent commentators were named as aggressively anti-LGBT Pentecostal-charismatic pastors Joseph Serwadda, Martin Ssempe, and Solomon Male, as well as Stephen Langa. The participants’ interviews revealed three key reasons why this group of Pentecostal leaders were regularly called upon for comment. Firstly, religious leaders are seen as important

opinion makers in Uganda, particularly concerning matters of the family and relationships. Thus, when journalists feel that they need to include a professional opinion in their piece, they more often than not turn to religious leaders for comment. Secondly, this particular cadre of religious leaders and commentators are noted for their accessibility. These men are easy to get hold of, and eager and willing to comment to get their voices heard. An editor at the *New Vision*, remarked that, “they are ready! They pick [up] their phones! Stephen Langa, he's ready; Ssempe, ready. So if a journalist is not that conscientious then they will rely upon that”.⁸⁷

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, this group of Pentecostal commentators were considered to be ‘politically uncritical’ and likely to say things that resonate with the dominant public discourse on sex and morality. A participant clarified that “journalists talk to pastors because they are the opinion leaders of our country ... That is the just the way it is. So the space here for any kind of alternative views, any views that are different to the mainstream views on marriage and family and sex, is very, very limited.”⁸⁸

6. Conclusion

This article has explored the complex relationships between Uganda’s English language print media and the coverage and interpretation of sexuality and argued that Pentecostal-charismatic understandings are becoming increasingly influential in framing editorial policies and the writing of sex and sexuality in Ugandan newspapers. The response to sexuality in the public sphere is closely aligned to what Sadgrove *et al.* suggest is “an emphasis on morality grounded in behaviour” that influences conceptions of subjectivity.⁸⁹ This has an effect on the space that is available to discuss multiple understandings of sexuality and has the potential to close down avenues, for example, to discuss LGBT rights. That the Ugandan print media do not discuss sexualities that do not conform to the hegemonic heteronormative discourse is vitally important, particularly in the context of the Anti-homosexuality Bill and sexual minorities rights.

Further, the research shows that contemporary conceptions of civility and morality are strongly influenced by Ugandan PCCs. These codes, informed by marriage and reproduction, are closely aligned to conservative Christian interpretations; historical mainline churches remain important in everyday Ugandan life.⁹⁰ The past decade has,

however, seen this religious landscape change dramatically, with the “rise, spread and phenomenal appeal of PCCs” across the continent.⁹¹ The positioning of the PCCs as a thoroughly modern alternative to the established churches is, in part, one reason they have become so popular. Newspapers not only want to cover the events of PCCs, but to appeal to their sensibilities in order to attract what is interpreted as an ever-growing readership of PCC young attendees. This is most evident at *The Red Pepper*, which has had a total overhaul of its look and content to appeal to this readership group.

We realize that although the findings from our interviews with journalists and extensive ethnographic fieldwork with PCCs in Kampala, cannot be generalized to all media practitioners, they nonetheless, provide an important contextual understanding to a rapidly changing religious and social landscape in Uganda. This research is, however, troubling in terms what it means for LGBT rights. Print media remains an important tool within the public sphere in the country and its lack of coverage of the plurality of sexuality remains a significant impediment to achieving recognition for sexual choice, lifestyle and parity.

Notes

¹ *The Daily Monitor*, “Kadaga, Canadian Minister in gay row.”

² *Reuters*, “Uganda says wants to pass anti-gay law.”

³ Tamale, “A Human Rights Impact Assessment.”

⁴ Edwards, “Ugandan Anti-gay Bill is an obscuring screen.”

⁵ Epstein, *The Invisible Cure*.

⁶ Gusman, “The Joseph Generation in Uganda.”

⁷ Debates on the reform of the Marriage and Divorce Bill cover a wide range of marriage, divorce and gender issues, including bride wealth, female circumcision and rights of cohabitating couples. The Bill caused controversy from the beginning, with some objecting to the very naming of the proposal which places marriage and divorce in the same breath, other arguing that it was a Bill that only favour women. A common objection was that the Bill undermines traditional and religious understandings of marriage and property relations.

⁸ Interview with senior leader in the Pentecostal Assemblies of God. Kampala, 25 March 2013.

⁹ For an extended analysis of the ‘Pentecostalization’ of the Uganda public sphere, see for example Valois, Caroline. 2014. “Public Rebirth. Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity, Sexuality, Public Health & Nation Building in Uganda”. Unpublished PhD thesis. Centre of African Studies. The University of Edinburgh.

¹⁰ Thomas, *Strong religion, zealous media*.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Meyer and Moor, *Religion, media and the public sphere*, 57.

¹³ Those churches are Watoto, previously known as Kampala Pentecostal Church (KPC) presided by the two non-Ugandan pastors Gary and Marilyn Skinner; Life Line Ministries (LLM) presided over by Bishop Julius Peter Oyet, a vocal pastor in his support of the Anti-homosexuality Bill; Covenant Nation Church (CNC) set up by President Museveni's daughter, Snr. Pastor Patience Museveni Rwabwogo and frequently attended by the First Lady Janet Museveni; Miracle Centre Cathedral (MCC) run by senior pastor Robert Kayanja and his wife Jessica Kayanja, very well known and influential pastors in Kampala.

¹⁴ According to Uganda Demographic and Health Survey (2006) most of the population is exposed to some form of media. In general, men are more likely than women to have access to mass media; this is true for all types of media. Radio is the most popular medium. Listenership in Uganda is very high, with InterMedia estimating in 2005 that 100% of the population had listened to the radio in the past year, 92.8% in the past seven days, and 73.7% as recently as the day before (InterMedia, 2005). Twenty-one percent of men read a newspaper at least once a week, compared with 15 percent of the women. Reflecting the limited television broadcast coverage in the country, the percentage of women and men who watch television is low (11 percent of women and 14 percent of men).

¹⁵ Interview with Mwanguhya-Mpagi, Kampala, January 29, 2013.

¹⁶ Sadgrove et al, "Morality plays and money matters."

¹⁷ Ward, "Eating and Sharing", 112.

¹⁸ Gifford, "Pentecostalism in Museveni's Uganda", 105.

¹⁹ Ward, 2005, "Eating and Sharing."

²⁰ Gifford, "Pentecostalism in Museveni's Uganda", 104.

²¹ Lindemann, "Just another change of guard", 387.

²² Cited in *Daily Monitor*, "Museveni 24 years later."

²³ Gifford, *African Christianity*.

²⁴ Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America*, 142.

²⁵ Gusman, "The Joseph Generation in Uganda", 68.

²⁶ Cooper, "The theology of emergency."

²⁷ Patterson, *The Church and AIDS in Africa*.

²⁸ The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) is the U.S. Government initiative to tackle HIV (but also Tuberculosis and Malaria) around the world.

²⁹ Gusman, "The Joseph Generation in Uganda", 68.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Cooper, "The theology of emergency", 3.

³² Ibid, 2.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Clarke, "Agents of transformation?", 82.

³⁶ Gussman, "The Joseph Generation in Uganda."

³⁷ Ibid, 68.

³⁸ For a critique to the way HIV has dominantly framed discussions around sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa while aspects like eroticism, pleasure and feelings remained excluded, see Sponk, "Sex, Sexuality and Negotiating Africaness in Nairobi" and Sponk, *Ambiguous pleasure*.

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- ³⁹ Tamale, “Out of the closet”, 5
- ⁴⁰ Gysele et al, “The Adventures of Randy Professor”
- ⁴¹ Tamale, “Eroticism, Sensuality and Women’s Secrets”
- ⁴² *The New Vision*, “Uganda Bans Miniskirts, pornography”
- ⁴³ Meyer, “Christianity in Africa”, 464-467
- ⁴⁴ Similarly, see for example the study of PCCs and sexuality in Mozambique by van de Kamp “Public counseling: Brazilian Pentecostal intimate performances”
- ⁴⁵ Watoto Church sermon, 16 February 2013.
- ⁴⁶ Opolot, “Red and raunchy.”
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, 33.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with a *Red Pepper* journalist, Kampala, June 10, 2013.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ So much so, that the newspaper’s football team is called ‘The Hyenas’; interview with *The Red Pepper* journalists, Kampala, June 10, 2013.
- ⁵¹ Hyena, “Skilled! Hyena hooks a neighbors [sic] wife.”
- ⁵² The newspaper announced it’s rebranding on May 17, 2013, and was closed down on May 20, 2013, the day it published its first rebranded copy.
- ⁵³ Rugyendo, “The Red Pepper rebrands.”
- ⁵⁴ Interview with *Red Pepper* journalist, Kampala, June 10, 2013.
- ⁵⁵ See Nyakato, “Nourish your way to the birth of Jesus Christ with Christmas Cantata”; Mwesigwa, “Sleek bodies, gospel music”; Ahimbazwe, “Miracle Dance Heaven”; Editorial, “Weekend buzz: Rev Bar at Watoto”; Mukisa, “Taking the nightclub experience into church.”
- ⁵⁶ For example, church events are regularly covered in *The Observer*’s “Weekend Buzz” section in its Friday edition and journalists from all newspapers disclosed that the media departments of some prominent city churches would ensure that the press knew about their future events for publicising reasons.
- ⁵⁷ Uganda has the world’s youngest population. 78% of the population is under 30 years old and 52% of its population is under 15 years old; see UNFPA, *State of the world’s population*.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with a *New Vision* journalist, Kampala, February 6, 2013.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Interview with a *New Vision* editor, Kampala, May 23, 2013.
- ⁶² Haggai Institute, “Barbara Kaija’s new vision covers more than the media”; Lloyd, “Uganda’s controversial pastors.”
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Interview with a *New Vision* editor, Kampala, May 23, 2013.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Interviews with a journalist from the *The Observer* and one from *The Red Pepper*, Kampala, 10 June 2013.
- ⁶⁸ Interview with a *New Vision* journalist, Kampala, February 6, 2013.
- ⁶⁹ Interview with a *New Vision* journalist, Kampala, March 15, 2013.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Ibid.
- ⁷² See <http://haggai-institute.com/barbara-kaija#.UhZRMhaDbww>, accessed on July 30, 2013.

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- ⁷³ Interview with a *New Vision* journalist, Kampala, March 15, 2013; interview with a *The Vision* journalist, Kampala, June 11, 2013.
- ⁷⁴ Interview with a journalist, Kampala, May 20, 2013.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid.
- ⁷⁶ Interview with columnist at the *Observer*, Kampala, June 11, 2013.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Interview with an *Observer* editor, Kampala, May 25, 2013.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Interview with a *New Vision* journalist, Kampala, May 20, 2013.
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² Nakajubi and Odyek, "Must marriage be such a big deal?"; Vision Reporter, "Unity vital in fight against poverty says First Lady"; Kagolo, "Govt commends Victoria University over gay stance"; Natukunda, "The 'crime' of getting pregnant at university"; Editorial, "Couples urged to communicate"; Vision Reporter, "Ankole diocese leaders hailed for youth mentorship programme"; Isabirye, "Are church boys slow?"; Lutwama, "My son's brush with death renewed my faith"; Vision Reporter, "Uganda youth forum holds re-union"; Mambule, "Women warned on domestic violence"; Saad and Agaba, "Parents asked to advise daughters on sexuality and adolescence."
- ⁸³ *The New Vision*, "Uganda youth forum holds re-union."
- ⁸⁴ Saad and Agaba, "Parents asked to advise daughters."
- ⁸⁵ Ibid.
- ⁸⁶ Sadgrove *et al.*, "Morality plays and money matters," 112.
- ⁸⁷ Interview with a *New Vision* editor, Kampala, May 20, 2013.
- ⁸⁸ Interview with a *Daily Monitor* journalist, Kampala, May 24, 2013.
- ⁸⁹ Sadgrove *et al.*, "Morality plays", 112.
- ⁹⁰ Ward, "The role of the Anglican and Catholic Churches in Uganda."
- ⁹¹ Meyer, "Christianity in Africa", 447.

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